

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature

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WEB-WORK PLOT STRUCTURE

(Continued from June Number.)

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Now for a very important feature. Note carefully how Kentland is brought successively, and quite early in the narration, into an encounter with six other characters of vital importance in the story. Each of the first six incidents brings him into relation with a new character. In 10 he receives instructions from Fornhoff; in 13 he delivers instructions to Jeffrich; in 18 he receives an anonymous tip from Boltman which sends him flying to Crilly Court; in 19 he runs down the girl, Yvonne; in 20 he discovers evidence that somehow connects Doctor Watling with the affair; and in 21 he comes upon the body of the murdered man and the mutilated picture. Thus, one after another, his path crosses the paths of every other actively functioning factor in the story, except the secret picture, which is held in reserve for the climax. Regarding the philosophy of these early crossings, Keeler says:

Watch every one of my stories; watch any other story that constitutes successful web-work, and you will be struck by a peculiar fact. It is absolutely necessary that the viewpoint character make a number of rapid crossings with other characters, so that they may be gotten into the network—so that the author may begin to weave! Just as sure as you keep down your strands by not having sufficient crossings in the beginning, you will have nothing to weave with—or you will have so few strands that your web-work will be no more complex than the pigtail down a little Dutch girl's back. In this story note how the narration opens in the first paragraph with Kentland, immediately establishing point of view. Note the rapidity with which the next five incidents involving him take place, each introducing a different character. See the rationale of the thing? Each incident throws into existence a different strand by which we can at once proceed to weave complex patterns. I was a year discovering the philosophy of this; that unless one deliberately projects a number of characters in quick succession into a story, one will flounder helplessly in trying to build up a web-work plot.

Combining this with the interrelation that must exist between all the incidents of a story, we have what may be termed a mathematical rule which may be expressed: If the thread A, or viewpoint character, figures with the thread B in an opening incident of numerical order "n" there must follow rapidly after the opening of the story an incident n-plus-1 involving threads A and C, an incident n-plus-2 involving threads A and D, an incident n-plus-3 involving threads A and E, and so on, up to perhaps at least n-plus-4 or n-plus-5; and furthermore, n must produce n-plus-1, n-plus-2 must be the result of n-plus-1, n-plus-3 must be the result of n-plus-2, and so on.

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With this expression of what may, for convenience, be termed the "Keeler law," let us put ourselves in the position of the author as he wrote this story. We may safely assume—since this is quite a usual way of writing tales of this type—that in the beginning he had no ideas for what came to be the "Crilly Court Mystery" beyond that of developing and solving a complex problem. As a starter, he created a likable, fairly typical young fellow to take the part of hero. Since the reader must be made to enter into close accord with the hero—must see events from his viewpoint—it was essential that the young man should have no repellent traits of character and should not be too extreme in any particular—just a pleasant, earnest, chivalrous, ambitious, healthy-minded young fellow, whose personality the reader could be led to assume without repugnance. Thus Kentland came into existence.

But before the author could begin to weave, there must be more strands. Kentland was therefore brought forcibly into relation with another character, whom the author chose to make a newspaper owner, thus contrasting with Kentland, the reporter. An incident was devised between these two (10), then the author cleared the stage in order to bring on another character (13). Thus was evolved Jeffrich, who later proved to be the villain, although at the time the author probably did not know what part he would play.

Three characters had now been created, and it seemed advisable to insert a note of mystery. Therefore Kentland was made to receive an anonymous note (18), advising him to call at 1710 Crilly Court. The author, at this time, was probably as much in the dark as a reader could be concerning the authorship and meaning of the note. He had not yet invented further incidents. Observe what Keeler himself says on this point:

At the time of introducing it, I knew that the writer of the anonymous note must be someone, but for a long time I kept that thread free. It was only later in the plotting that I made Boltman, Fornhoff's city editor, the writer of it. But I had it in readiness, so that I might have fastened it upon any one of several characters. Of course, the note might have come from a casual stroller of the midnight streets; but that would not have been good work—it would have involved a loose thread and would therefore have been weak plotting. In the web-work plot, the characters should be involved with each other in complex relationships.

By this time, the author felt the need of introducing a thread of romance, so a crossing was contrived with a girl character. Since Kentland was already racing toward the scene of the mystery in a taxi, a convenient method of bringing her into the narrative was to run her down, near enough to the mysterious address to suggest that she might be involved. Now let the author explain how incident 20 was created, thus bringing into existence still another strand:

In plotting the story I placed in the girl's hand a card bearing a name and

address. I took pains, you see, to effect a crossing between Kentland and someone, as the opportunity offered, knowing that the new thread might be of great value in solving or making up the structure. I did not worry as to who it was going to be. I just called it "X" and told myself that later I would use X to help me out. It was a long time before I found a use for X, although I knew a use could be found for him without fail, sooner or later. Without yet knowing why, I chased Kentland around to X's address, after he got off duty (incident 23), knowing that I could achieve a good surprise if I bumped him into Fornhoff there. And remember, I didn't yet even have an address picked out.

Some time later, I found a splendid use for X. I was able to substitute a character in place of the symbol—to solve the equation, as it were. I found that it would make matters very plotty to create two pictures of "The Man From Saturn"; to make X the purchaser of picture A and Mazurka the purchaser of picture B. That would account for Fornhoff's trying to get into X's office at that hour of the morning. Thus was born Doctor Watling.

In this manner, inventing incidents and creating characters or potential characters, along the way, the author brought the hero to the scene of the murder (21). By this time there were more than half a dozen strands with which to weave. But the strands, even in the author's mind, were not yet woven into a pattern. Some of them had not even been named. Figure VI would represent the story as it thus far existed in the author's mind (numbers referring to incidents designated by the key to the complete graph):

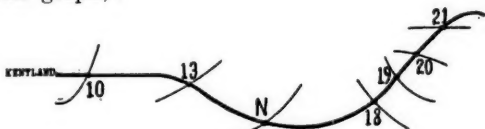


FIG. VI

N stands for one or more probable incidents which the author may have included in his early plotting, but which were later dropped because the strands which developed from them could not be woven into the story. It is often necessary to introduce several trial characters and incidents before the most useful are decided upon.

With the strands thus far thrown into existence, the author begins to weave, gradually, as the story is carried forward. He is constantly alert for possible relationships between the strands. The anonymous note is partially accounted for by the fact that whoever sent it had discovered the murder. From incident 18, therefore, the author weaves back and effects a crossing of the intersecting strand (which is not yet named) with the strand representing Mazurka, the victim (incident 16). And in order that the murder may be accounted for, there must have been another intersection, say at 15. This crossing might be connected up with any one of the characters. The author's final decision is to connect it up with Jeffrich, who was introduced in scene 13.

The weaving has begun. It must be carried back still fur-

ther, so as to create a motive for the crime. A relation between the girl and the incidents must be devised by bringing her into contact with Jeffrich, with Fornhoff, and with the murdered man. The character who sends the anonymous note is finally fixed as Boltman, the city editor, and he is brought into the story through an encounter with Fornhoff (14) and so on. Even yet the story is by no means a complete structure, but the weaving has commenced and a pattern has begun to take shape. As far as the author now sees into the story, it stands about thus:

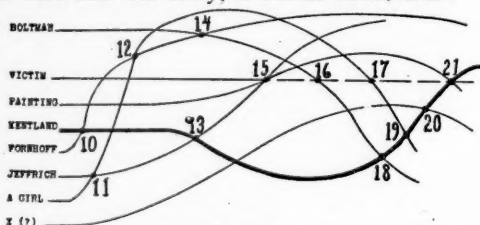


FIG. VII

Many of the relationships gradually established by the author are not disclosed to the reader or to Kentland until near the conclusion of the story. Figure V, the complete graph, represents the final relationship between all characters that eventually is unfolded, after it has become fixed in the author's mind.

Note particularly that the author does not merely weave forward. Everything that happens to Kentland must be accounted for by devising incidents—character reactions—that have taken place in the past. Now this involves revealing many things through passages of retrospect. And retrospective narration is not ordinarily as gripping as direct narration. Readers, as a rule, do not care so much to know what has happened as what is going to happen next. An illustration will make this clear. Suppose we see a child struggling for life in the current of a swift river. Our first thought is—not “How did the child happen to fall in?” but—“How can we rescue the child?” Only after it is safely on the bank will we begin to inquire about the details of the accident.

This applies to ordinary narration and conveys an approximate idea of the relative effectiveness of retrospective and direct narration. But in nearly all fiction, particularly mystery stories, retrospect is a necessity. Concerning the backward and forward weaving of a story as it is involved in an author's brain, and the best methods for overcoming the handicap under which retrospective narration suffers, Keeler observes:

As we begin to build the web-work plot ahead—to develop it, as it were—we are forced almost always to create plot incidents—intersections of the strands

in use—which lie back of the beginning of the story. The beauty of creating a set of strands ready to use is that we can weave backward as well as forward. In fact, the author has to weave back of the time axis as well as forward. His task is difficult enough as it is, without making him stay in front of the time axis. This involves the necessity in the story proper for reminiscent narration. I am convinced that the mystery plot can not be presented without some reminiscent narration. In a story in which the dramatic interest is created by conflict or obstacle only, the various threads of a plot web may be developed by alternate chapters. But in a mystery plot the earlier mysterious complications are produced by the intersection of an already spun web with the thread in which the viewpoint lies. For a long time it is highly inadvisable to present those other threads. They should not be uncovered until the curiosity tension is so high, so taut, that the presentation of those threads in reminiscent narration is eagerly read by the reader, because it partly releases the tension.

Reminiscent narration, we know, is ordinarily inferior to dramatic action in maintaining interest, but if the curiosity tension is sufficiently taut, the reminiscent narration will be lapped up by the reader as hungrily as a cat laps up milk.

A study of the diagram (Figure V) will indicate the necessity for reminiscent narration in the author's development of the "Crilly Court Mystery." Incident 39 contains an important bit of reminiscent narration. In this encounter Boltman is forced to disclose to Kentland what took place in incidents 14 and 16, which, as a glance at the graph will show, lie entirely outside of the line of direct narration. In this same bit of reminiscent narration Boltman also admits that he sent the anonymous news tip, thus completing the reader's understanding of incident 18, and he gives a one-sided account of incidents 2, 5, 9, and 12, thus explaining Fomhoff's connection with the affair, but not Yvonne's.

The longest and most important stretch of reminiscent narration occurs in incident 32, in which Yvonne, having been traced down by Kentland, clears up practically the whole mystery, relating what has previously been hidden concerning incidents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 17.

It will be seen that a vital crisis in the solution of the mystery results from bringing together characters (such as Yvonne and Kentland in this instance) who have figured in the same net of web-work, but in widely different parts of it. Hence the advisability of keeping important characters more or less separated until the climax, when suspense has been created and the reader is ready for the retrospective narration that results from bringing them together. In the "Crilly Court Mystery" Kentland's path crosses Yvonne's directly but twice, previous to the final "show-down"—just enough to bring her into the story and whet the reader's curiosity. And both times she is unconscious or dazed, so that Kentland learns nothing from her. The author's object (as may be seen from his own previously quoted statement) in keeping them so long separated was that the curiosity tension concerning her part in the mystery might be sufficiently great to allow for the extended stretch of reminiscent narration which he foresaw would be necessary when they finally come together. The reader would not

have waded through so much explanation had Yvonne been any less mysterious and difficult to locate.

This seems to me a novel principle of story technique, and one of supreme importance.

It will be seen that the solution of the mystery, as represented on the graph, is accompanied by bringing the characters together one after another. When a certain character has told all that he can he is dropped. The result is that the graph tapers off, pyramid-like, toward the conclusion, and the interest consequently becomes more intense, because narrowed down to fewer persons. Also, it may be said that the characters are thus "milked dry" and dropped in reverse order of their importance. Mazurka is the first to go, having served his purpose as victim of the crime. The mystery centers not so much around him as around the unexplained mutilation of the picture which was in his possession. Boltman next tells all that he knows (29) and is no more needed. Doctor Watling serves his purpose (33) when the secret picture is found in his apartment. Fornhoff and the picture drop out when they have been brought together (34), and when Jeffrich has been identified (35) he too ceases to be a factor. There remain at the last only the two more important characters, from the reader's point of view; the girl Yvonne, and Kentland, whose life became linked with hers when the web-work entangled him in its meshes.

A lesson to be drawn from this "tapering off" is that, in arranging the series of crises by means of which the mystery is solved, the author should be careful to save the disclosures of the more important characters, so far as possible, until the last. Nothing is more disappointing to the reader than to have one of the strong, interesting characters of a story drop out of active participation in events before the narrative is two-thirds finished.

Reminiscent narration requires careful handling, even when excused by necessity. Besides preparing for it by building up the suspense to a point where it comes as a welcome relief from the tautness, the author usually makes it more interesting by breaking it up into dialogue, instead of inserting it as a solid chunk—a story within a story. A story should not close with reminiscent narration. A bit of dramatic action should always be left for the wind-up.

(To be Concluded in August Number.)

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SHALL WE DESPAIR?

Many have informed the "workshop" lately that they have temporarily given up writing, feeling that it is hardly worth while to tempt the magazines during the war crisis.

While it is no doubt true that curtailment of expenses is going on in magazine offices as elsewhere, as long as the magazines are being published they will need contributions. With many scribes giving up in discouragement, the chances are perhaps better than ever for the few who "hang on." One editor has informed me that the number of manuscripts submitted for his consideration has fallen off to a marked extent since the United States entered the world-war. Doubtless this is true of all publications. Wise writers will push their wares the more persistently, while the competition is thus reduced.

Dear Mr. Hawkins: I have before me The Student-Writer for June, which I have read. I must say, it contains the only article on plot I have ever read that is worth a thought. You've got 'em all skinned! I await the coming of your next issue with ingrowing pains of mental trepidation. You don't mean to say you know still more about plot! You've already told me more than all the text-books in the Chi. public library. But I fear I'll never, never, be a web-foot plotter. Keeler's already discovered that the harder he works to overcomplicate each succeeding plot, the more the editors will expect of him next time. Finally he'll blow up—unable to reach his own standard. Nevertheless, Harry Stephen is a white Scotchman for you—hard to please, but just and encouraging, and knows something.

Cordially,

JOHN IRVING PEARCE, JR.

My Dear Mr. Hawkins: It might help a little all around if you could somewhere tuck into The Student-Writer a word to the effect that ADVENTURE is temporarily overstocked with stories of over 10,000 words and will not be buying any until October. We are, however, steadily in the market for short stories. I'll be glad if you can find a place for this little item.

Very truly yours,

A. S. HOFFMAN,
Editor of Adventure.

Dear Mr. Hawkins: It may interest you to know that I profited by your criticism of my story to such an extent that it has made something of a record. Here is its history: I cut the thing square in two, as you advised, and sent it to an agent. He sold it to Snappy Stories, and to my great astonishment it was reprinted in Current Opinion. Four days later I received a request for the moving-picture rights, and later a similar request from another firm. I sold the moving picture rights for \$500 and also sold, on the strength of this, the movie rights to my novel. The story was also listed in "O'Brien's short-stories of 1916. Furthermore, I have been offered a position as consulting scenario writer, and have been asked for more of my screen stories. I want you to know that I thoroughly appreciated the careful and lengthy suggestions you made about my other queer little story which you criticised.

Cordially,

Dear Mr. Hawkins: Really, The Student-Writer is worth its weight in gold, platinum, potatoes, onions, or any other war-priced commodity. I find this true because nearly every article that appears in it either gives me an idea which I had not sufficiently got hold of, as 'Dramatizing Fiction' in your May number, or confirms my experience along some line, as does "Mechanical Principles of Creative Writing," in the same issue. I am only one of the unknowns, but the signed letters from editors are coming faster now, a fourth installment of encouragement having reached me today from one of the oldest and best known book publishers in America. If the Kaiser captures Denver, here's hoping he won't turn your press into bullets.—B. H. E.

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Dear Mr. Hawkins: You recently criticised for me and suggested changes in a story I sent you. Following your suggestion I changed the tale about and yesterday received an acceptance from Mr. Davis of the Munsey publications. I take this opportunity to thank you for your painstaking and elucidating criticism.

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